

This project will protect one of the largest remaining tracts of privately-owned property in the Upper Methow watershed. The site provides critical shrub-steppe habitat and links to existing public lands and private conserved (conservation easement) land to provide critical wildlife movement corridors. The Lehman Uplands landowner has stated that without conservation easement funding, he will subdivide and sell his land to residential development. Zoning allows for the site to be subdivided into as many as 51 lots.

This proposal will secure a permanent conservation easement on approximately 1,028 acres of critical shrub-steppe and associated riparian draws and wetlands. The site is adjacent to large tracts of public land to the north and east and conserved (conservation easement) private land and public land that extends to the west. The project site represents a “doughnut hole” in what would otherwise be a nearly continuous stretch of protected land that extends from the opposite side of the valley, across the Methow River, through the shrub-steppe hillsides of the project site, and up to higher elevation conifer forests. By protecting this land, the project contributes to an essential wildlife movement corridor. In addition, the diverse habitats represented in this larger protected corridor provide for habitat for a large range of wildlife species and for species that require several types of habitats, such as gray wolves, mountain lion, mule deer, and bats.

The project site contains an expansive area of undeveloped shrub-steppe habitat with bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue, bitterbrush, sage, and several lomatium and buckwheat species. Scattered ponderosa pine are present in some areas. Riparian draws are dominated by aspen and dogwood, and wetlands are dominated by sedges. Historic grazing has resulted in some changes to the grassland and riparian communities, with annual grasses and weeds such as knapweed, mustard, and whitetop present in some areas. However, as part of this project, a new approach to grazing will occur on the land. This approach, referred to as “conservation-oriented” grazing, uses a light grazing approach and intensive monitoring that is designed to reduce non-native grasses and weeds and increase the abundance of native bunchgrasses. Cattle will be fenced out of the riparian draws and wetlands. This conservation-oriented grazing approach has been successful at increasing the abundance of native bunchgrasses in several other areas, such as the eastern Sierra Nevadas.

This proposal will benefit 20 priority species and habitats, including federal and state-listed species (see Attachment J). Targeted shrub-steppe, riparian, and wetland communities are state priority habitats and are vital for a number of imperiled species, including gray wolves and sharp-tailed grouse. Gray wolf packs have been documented in the Methow Valley in recent years, and the project site contains suitable habitat for the species. The site also provides critical mule deer habitat, and mule deer are the target prey of gray wolves. In addition, note that the project area is the site of the last known sharp-tailed grouse (a state-threatened species) lek, and the site is a potential re-introduction area for the species. Some of the other wildlife species that will benefit

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from protection of this project site include, mountain lions, dusky grouse, western bluebirds, and Brewer's sparrows.